

Q: Good afternoon. Today is April 11th, 2019. My name is Kathleen Hennrikus and I am here at the Newton Free Library with Bob Parlin. Today we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project, that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So the first question is: what is your connection to Newton?

A: I began working in Newton at Newton North High School, doing my student teaching there in 1987, and I've been teaching history at Newton South High School since 1988, so almost 31 years now.

Q: Can you do a little bit of describing what Newton South High School was like when you started and what it's like now and how it's changed?

A: Sure. So Newton South when I got there was a much smaller school, almost half the size of what it is now--about maybe 1,100, 1,050 students--and it was a place where you could really get to know everyone in the building. We had a wonderful principle, Ernest Van Seasholes, who knew every student's name. And I knew most of the faculty, I knew pretty much all of the students. It was a much smaller community back then, and it was a wonderful place where very high academic standards--not much school spirit I would say, and that probably continues today, in the way we traditionally think of school spirit, but it certainly had amazing opportunities that it offered for students to take incredible extracurricular offerings as well as academic offerings. And today, that's changed quite a bit, in that the offerings have increased dramatically, we have far more classes than ever before, but we have almost double the students. We have 1900 students right now. And it does make for a harder place to really feel like you have a connection to everyone. So I don't know many of the students. I certainly know my students well, but it feels like a much bigger place that is harder to make individual connections. So it's been a challenge.

Q: And you teach....what's your subject?

A: So I teach history. I teach 9th grade world history that's linked to an English class. I traditionally taught US history for most of my thirty years, but about 7 years ago I started a course called "Race, Class, and Gender," and it's a senior elective, and I teach two sections of that. And last year we went from two sections to four sections, so more and more students are taking it. And it's about social justice, a topic that a lot of students care about.

Q: That's great. And the racial breakdown at Newton South?

A: So it's about 70 percent, a little less than 70 percent white. The largest student of color population is Asian, about 20 percent, and then the rest of the students are about 50/50 Latino and black and a number of mixed race students.

Q: That's great. And have you noticed that changing over the time that you've been there as well? The racial population, racial characteristics at the school, and/or gender?

A: The gender balance--it's a fairly even gender balance. In terms of race, I would say we have a few more black students than before but not a hugely different percentage. Still a fairly small--about 5 percent. And I would say that the Latino population has grown, probably doubled, in the 30 years that I've been here. But still it's not a sizable group, it's maybe 6.5.

Q: And does Newton South participate in METCO? So do you get--do you have kids from--

A: Yes. So about half of the black students at South are in the METCO program, and the other half live here locally.

Q: Which means, right, that they bus to Newton South every day, and that's a long ride.

A: Yeah, hours on the bus.

Q: Have you noticed any...I assume that the METCO students need to get home as well, so how is that extracurricular activity-wise?

A: It's a challenge. There is a late bus, so they do provide that for students in the METCO program, but even with that, it makes it harder to be a part of the community. I do think Newton goes out of its way to try to make students feel welcome, but often our black and Latino students say they aren't as connected as their white and Asian counterparts. We have shows after school, where there are rehearsals that often go into the early evenings, and so having access to transportation is a real challenge.

Q: Okay. And one of the things we wanted to talk to you about specifically was the start of the--what was then called the Gay-Straight Alliance, the first one in the country. Congratulations, that's quite an achievement.

A: Thanks. First public school, I have to say.

Q: First public school. Can you talk about what the beginnings were like and how it came to be an extracurricular club, an activity, and who showed up at the beginning and how that worked?

A: So in the late '80s, when I first came to Newton South, there were no out gay teachers, there were no students who were out. Homosexuality was a very much a taboo subject, and no one talked anything about it. It wasn't in our health curriculum, there really was no mention of it.

Q: I'm sorry and what was this year again?

A: 19--well, it was in the late '80s. I got there in '88. And Massachusetts did pass a law banning discrimination--firing from your job for being gay--in 1989. But even then, I felt as a gay teacher, I didn't feel like I could come out and that my job would be totally safe, in that they

weren't really hiring many new teachers. They couldn't fire me for being gay, but I wasn't absolutely sure that it couldn't have an impact on my position. So I was closeted for the first few years. And I had joined a committee on human differences it was called, where we dealt with issues of human difference.

Q: At the school?

A: Yeah, at the school. It was a faculty committee with the principal sitting on it and a number of department chairs, and--mostly faculty members. But we dealt with issues of race, we dealt with issues of anti-Semitism. We looked at class issues. And one meeting I just raised the issue of maybe talking about sexual orientation, and it actually got a fairly favorable response. So I was looking forward to the next meeting when they were going to talk about it and plan maybe doing some programs for the faculty or maybe even the students. And when I got to the meeting--I arrived a little late, and I could see incredibly concerned looks on everyone's faces, and they were clearly talking about talking about sexual orientation. And I listened--

Q: But they didn't wait for the key ingredient.

A: Well, they didn't know at the time that I was gay, they just knew that I had raised it. But they were talking about whether or not we should go forward and all of the discussion was filled with fear. So I heard comments like, "Well, you know this just isn't an issue here in Newton. It may be an issue in Provincetown, or San Francisco, but not here in Newton." Another person said that, "This is such a controversial subject that we would be creating a problem that we don't currently have, so we'd be raising an issue and making it into a problem." Others said that the parents would not accept us doing anything with the students. Some said that it was just too much of an adult issue, and that students really weren't at all interested in hearing about sexual orientation. The final comment that just kind of drove me crazy, was a guidance counselor said that he'd been at Newton South for 25 years, and he'd never had a student who was gay or lesbian. And I--well,

I didn't chuckle because I was horrified by all of these comments, and he ended his comments with, "So I just don't think we have a problem here."

And I said, "Well, let me tell you why we do have a problem here," and I talked about what it was like growing up. I grew up in central Massachusetts, and there were no gay people visible. There were no role models. If I ever heard of anyone who was homosexual it was in a terrible context--some kind of psychopath or someone very broken. And I learned very early on to hate myself. And it was a terrible thing, struggling with my own sexual orientation, particularly in high school, and I attempted suicide after my senior year in high school. And I shared that with the group and I told them what it was like to feel like I had to come to school everyday and hide a part of who I was--that I had to be constantly on edge, monitoring all my words for fear that somehow I might reveal something that would jeopardize my job or have an impact on my relationship with students. By the time I finished--I went on for quite a while, because I was so worked up about this idea that we didn't have a problem--when I stopped, I looked around the room and most of the people were crying. And afterwards actually a colleague of mine came up to me and said, "I was going to stand up and say 'And I'm a lesbian, too,'" she said, "but I'm not."

Q: In solidarity.

A: So what was great about that was that people then said, "Okay, well what are we going to do," and they moved forward. They agreed that we should do some programs for the faculty and I shared with them this idea of a Gay-Straight Alliance that I had heard from my ex at the time--my partner at the time, now my ex--Kevin Jennings, who created the first Gay-Straight Alliance at Concord Academy. And I said, "You know they have this group of students who are both gay and straight who come together to talk about these issues as an after school club." And the principle said, "Well, that sounds great," and we began to plan faculty trainings in the fall, and then we also planned that we would put out there to students--I put up a sign--I think it was

early September--I put up a sign that said anyone interested in talking about issues of sexual orientation--I think that's how I put it--come to room 4205.

And I do want to point out there was a student who was working with me very closely, a guy named Matt Flynn, who was amazing. So he was a rising senior at the time and so for his senior year he helped me with this organization. So I would really say the two of us co-founded the first public school Gay-Straight Alliance. But we picked a date, we gave them a room, told them we would have cookies, and about I would say 50 to 60 students showed up that first meeting. The room was packed. Incredible energy level. And we just began to think about what we would do for the school in terms of activities we could plan to raise awareness, what students themselves needed in terms of just a safe space to be able to talk about these issues. So moving forward it was really incredible.

Now right before that I had come out to my classes. I hadn't been really out to my students at all, just to that group of faculty members at that committee. And so right before that--a very funny kind of anecdote that the principal, who was at the committee, knew that I did--he asked me, "Now, do you want to be out?" And I said, "Yeah, I really would like to come out, I just don't know exactly how to do that." There were virtually no other out teachers that I knew anywhere--knew of anywhere in the United States, really. There had been some, I later learned, but very few. So one day he came up to my room and knocked on the door and he said, "You know, I was in the middle of my class"--he taught a class for seniors--"I was in the middle of class and a student raised her hand and said, 'Is Mr. Parlin gay?'" And I said, "Well that's odd, what were you talking about?"

Q: Yeah, what precipitated--

A: He said, "We were talking about the Japanese trade deficit." I said, "Okay, so nothing to do with that." But clearly someone had gotten an inkling that I was gay, and so I began to think,

"Well what do I tell him?" "And so what did you do?" And he said, "Well I just I told the class, give me a minute." And he left the room and came up to my room and knocked on the door. So I told him, "Okay, well they're sitting there waiting, they probably think you've gone to check, so um...so why don't you go back and ask them--first of all tell them yes, that I'm fine with this--saying yes, but ask them why they wanted to know and try to have a little discussion about that." And he said he did that--they had a fantastic discussion, the students weren't at all hostile. It was actually a very supportive student who had asked the question and wanted to know if there were any people in the community like her. And so it turned out wonderfully in terms of his students, but then the next day I realized, "Okay, if his students know, I should really just bite the bullet." And I just sat my students down and said, "There's something I'd like to share with you, it doesn't really have a direct correlation to our history we're learning, but social justice issues come up all the time in history and this is related to that. I'm gay, and here's why I want you to know." And I shared three things I think. A) I wanted them to know that there are people who are happy and healthy and you know leading a very good life and that I hope that they could see me as someone like that, that--when I was growing up, there were no role models, no one who was visible.

Q: No Ellen doing a television show.

A: No, no Ellen. No celebrities. Really no one. There were a few people like Liberace who people suspected, but even Liberace wasn't out.

Q: He was not saying anything, yeah.

A: So I told them I wanted them to have that vision, so I could break stereotypes and--particularly the negative stereotypes. I wanted students to realize that stereotypes do come from some realities but those very hostile negative ones really weren't based on anything other than fear and hatred. And I wanted students in particular who were struggling with their sexual

orientation to feel like there was going to be a safe place for them, and that they wouldn't have to be silenced, they wouldn't have to be alone.

Q: Do you think that that idea resonated with so many students that first meeting because it was a revelation for everybody that this was in fact going on, and the fact that you didn't know it was going on didn't mean it wasn't going on. I'm thinking about the guidance counselor in particular, which--a guidance--

A: Yeah, exactly. I think the faculty were shocked at how many students came. I think they expected three or four, and I actually didn't expect many more than that, either. I just--I thought it was just too taboo of a subject. But I'm constantly finding throughout my years that students are ahead of the curve of where the older generation is in terms of these issues. They're far beyond us in terms of gender issues today, and so at the time they were far beyond us in terms of sexual orientation, so they really wanted to talk about this. I would say at least half of them were straight allies, and they said that they saw this issue, this LGBT rights issue, as the civil rights issue of their generation, and they wanted to be a part of it. And they were, they did amazing things--they lobbied at the state house for the student gay rights bill, which passed in 1994. We went around to schools all around Massachusetts and helped them set up Gay-Straight Alliances.

Q: Do you know how many there are today?

A: I think there are about 5,000 at least around the country. Not every school has them. Some schools have gone out of their way to stop them from forming. Sometimes to the extreme extent of having to ban all other clubs. In Utah, in Salt Lake City--

Q: So they wouldn't have to--

A: Yeah, because there's a law saying if you have any clubs, you have to allow clubs of all kinds. That's a federal law. So in Salt Lake City, briefly they banned all clubs rather than let the Gay-Straight Alliance meet. Eventually they saw that that was not something that that was not something they could--

Q: The feedback--

A: Yeah, that that couldn't be sustained, and they eventually allowed the Gay-Straight Alliance to meet. But a lot of the fears out there, just that we're going to be talking about sex or inappropriate things--we never talk about sex, we talk about identity, about safety, about controversial issues like gays in the military or same sex marriage, things like that.

Q: I think framing it as a civil rights issue helps to open the door to, this is not specifically about what people do, but rather how people are treated.

A: Exactly.

Q: And that helps people talk about what bothers them and what encourages them, I think. And that's what civil rights is all about.

A: Exactly. And one of the things that really resonated with a number of the adults and particularly with parents, was the issue of safety. So we'd frame these Gay-Straight Alliances as a place where students could feel safe. And statistics that we started to compile about youth risk behaviors showed dramatic differences between gay, lesbian, and trans students and their straight and cisgender counterparts in terms of suicide attempts, in terms of drug and alcohol use, in terms of getting involved in violence.

Q: And I'm sorry to say that that still is a huge chasm.

A: The gap is still there, yeah. But it has decreased in schools that have Gay-Straight Alliances. So that's a positive thing.

Q: That is a positive aspect of it. I wonder if over time as the students are ahead of the curve as you say, the idea in the gay community of having no more gay bookstores, because now there's a gay section in Barnes and Noble, or--so there's no specific...So how do you think the idea has transmuted through the years to have--what's it like today and what are students interested in? And the name has changed so that might give them an idea--give everybody an idea of the bigger picture.

A: Yeah about three years ago our president, Phil Batler, came to me and said, "You know, Gay-Straight Alliance is somewhat limiting. It doesn't talk really about gender at all, which is half of our mission, really, is to talk about kids who are struggling with their gender identity or sexual orientation. And the word "gay" isn't terribly inclusive of everyone necessarily." So he proposed keeping the letters and moving toward Gender and Sexuality Awareness as the GSA. So it was a kind of unanimous vote and everyone approved it. But I noticed a shift that was happening, that in the first 20 years or so of the group--we started in the early '90s, and all the way up to about 2012 or '11--it was very much a gay-straight alliance. So a good half the student population were straight-identified, and they saw themselves as allies. The past five years or so, I think partly because LGBT issues have been incorporated into the mainstream perhaps, more and more students have wanted a place that's really just an identity group where they can share their feelings with people like them. And so allies started to both drift away and I get the sense that the students are giving out a vibe that they're not always 100 percent welcome even, which frustrates me a bit, as someone who always saw allies as the critical part of the change that had to happen. But I think nowadays a number of young people may be more militant about wanting an affinity group that's just really them. And there were, right when the Gay-Straight Alliances started, there was another model, a kind of a parallel model--it was called Project 10. It was in LA and it was

just an LGBT support group just for kids, offering counseling really for them, and Cambridge Rindge and Latin set up Project 10 East, which is their version of it. So it was just for self-identified gay and trans kids. But--

Q: And was it called Project 10 for one in ten?

A: Yeah, for the idea that one in ten students were LGBT. But we decided to go this other direction, because we saw these groups as potentially being much more activist, much more advocates for change in the community. And I do think the GSA model has sort of won out, but it's interesting now that we seem to be shifting back towards the Project 10 model, and maybe that's a function of how society has changed, and young people really do want a place where they can just talk with people like them who share the same experiences, who share the same concerns. And I know that's happened among people of color--there are black affinity groups and Latino affinity groups, and so I think it's something that is happening in many different communities.

Q: I think, if you think about women suffragettes and the early parts of the Emancipation Proclamation and civil rights, that there were disparate groups that supported each other in the thought that in the future, if I support you for this initiative now, you'll support me in my initiative later. And sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn't, so--and identity politics has sort of gotten to be a charged term in terms of me yes, you no. But I think it's probably worth remembering that that is a very human condition, and if we go through that transformation, maybe people will realize that it's back to--it doesn't have to be--there can be both. There can be--alliances are always necessary and safe places are also necessary.

A: You know, I find the idea that--that term identity politics, that came about when white people, particularly white men, began to be threatened by the power of people of color, of other minority groups, and I think if you say it's politics based on identity, well isn't that what politics has

always been based on? White men have dominated our political system--that identity has been first and foremost with all the power. Suddenly when it's not white men it becomes this pejorative term that has a negative connotation, but I don't think we recognize that identity politics has been the reality for 300 years. It's just that people who are threatened by the changes are now feeling like, "Oh, but now it's extending to you and I don't want that to happen." So I'm hoping that it isn't about me versus you, but it's about that most of us--or *us*--there's such a--when you add together all those different groups of women, of people of color, of LGBTQ people, of people from working class backgrounds, that is the vast majority of this country, and hopefully we can unite and see that it isn't--you don't have a slogan like, "He's not one of us," which is often a slogan you see, and usually by white men.

Q: I wonder, too--which leads to immigration as being such a flash point, because people who--it seems to me that people who lose power are always nervous about what happens, so look for another group to say this is bad because it makes me feel better to say that you're bad, and there will always be a home for that sort of talk unfortunately. Which probably is stuff that you talk about in your class, because that's what has been--that has been going on forever. And it's important to realize that there have always been disparate elements, but history is made up of people who write history, and that has been white men who have been able to write the idea of, "We were always right and I'll show you how we were right."

A: It's funny, I start all my classes every year--one of the very first days is the lesson on who writes history and what are the challenges with that. It's not that there's anything wrong with--they've written their history in the past, it's been very Eurocentric and very Christian, very--it's a certain group of people, very highly educated wealthy people who have written most of the history books until about 50 years ago. But I think what's more important is to take from that--okay, what should an ideal history look like? What are the different perspectives that have been left out that we can bring in, we can do research on and finally see from those perspectives?

So everything I do in my history classes has that as a central tie, and I'm always asking students: how would this story be different if it was told by a different person?

Q: And how do they respond to that?

A: Oh, I think they're very excited by it. Even the white guys in the class. I mean, I'm white, you know...so I don't want them to feel threatened by it, I just want them to realize, "Oh, it's actually exciting to see different perspectives. It's interesting." It's nothing--it doesn't have to be threatening.

Q: So what's the group like now? What's the GSA like now? Who comes? I know you have a couple of programs that you try and do every year, can you talk a little bit about that?

A: So the group changes every year. It's fascinating to me how this--there are shifts between what are the dominate issues, what the racial makeup of the group is, what the ages are. This year we have all seniors and freshmen, for some reason. I have no idea why, just kind of coincidence. But we have a group of eighth graders coming up who have already visited, and they seem really energized. So we're going to have a very young but very energized group next year. And what has particularly changed, I would say again in the past five years, is we mostly talk about gender, much more so than we talk about sexual orientation. We do talk about sexual orientation every now and then, but I would say it's a much more gender-dominated discussion.

Q: And what are those discussions like? What--

A: Well, we just talk about different terminology that young people are using. We talk about how social media depicts LGBT people, what their connections with--like in literature or short videos that they watch. We'll often watch something and talk about it, whether or not it was sensitively done or how it could have been improved, what they like about it. And we do plan

these activities, because one of our missions is to raise awareness in the school. So we want students to feel like they're visible. So in the fall we have a Transgender Day of Remembrance, which tries to raise awareness about the victims of hate crimes, particularly trans women of color, who are disproportionately attacked and killed in this country, and actually around the world. So we have tried to raise awareness on that day with some programs. We invite speakers in to talk about trans issues. And our big day of the year is called "To Be Glad," which stands for transgender, bisexual, gay, lesbian, and asexual awareness day. And that day every period we have a different theme. This year we had an amazing lesbian refugee from Uganda, who talked about her experience having to flee Uganda and getting here last January and being arrested immediately, because she didn't have the proper paperwork. But it was an incredible talk and we try to just educate students about issues affecting LGBT people in the US and around the world. We talk about issues that often don't get talked about. For example, asexuality has been a fairly new topic that a lot of students want to talk about. It wasn't even a community I was aware of. I do trainings on these issues, and I really didn't think of asexual as a sexual orientation. But more and more--

Q: Can you talk about that a little bit? What that's like?

A: More and more people are identifying as asexual, and now really people who do trainings on sexual orientation do talk about people who are homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual--meaning you're not attracted to the gender of a person but just the individual--and asexual people, who have little or no sexual attraction. There are a number of students who identify as such, and they connect mostly online. There's a large "ace" community, it's called.

Q: There have been a couple of celebrities too, who have recently talked about that and feeling that way.

A: I can't give you names, actually.

Q: I can't either, but I know that it's been sort of--

A: Yeah, exactly, and you know people have always in the past either treated it as something, again, broken or dysfunctional about a person, or they've said it was just a phase and it wasn't something real. And of course that's exactly what LGBT--

Q: That sounds a little--

A: --what LGBT people have faced. And so that's when I first began to look into it, I went to a program at MIT, and I realized, "Wow, this is a group of people who--this is their sexual orientation, this is a reality, and why not talk about it?" And so we've encompassed asexuality, and another thing kind of paired with that is the idea of not just sexual orientation but romantic orientation. So more and more we've talked about how that's a slightly different angle of looking at things--who you might want to be in a relationship with, not necessarily a sexual relationship, but just a romantic relationship. So kids today do talk about their romantic orientation and their sexual orientation, as well as their gender identity in the group. So we have a lot to talk about.

Q: You do have a lot. Do you think, since we're at the library now and there seems to be a big jump in young adult literature in the teen area--

A: Yeah, it's great.

Q: Yeah. Has that had an impact on the students? Have they been reading that kind of stuff and saying, "Oh, I see--that's me, that's not me, I see."

A: It's incredible. They're devouring that literature, and it's so exciting to watch, because they get to see positive images as opposed to all the broken people or psychopaths and killers and terrible

victims. They don't--those people are still there in places, but in general they have amazing, wonderful role models, they have characters that they love. And in the English classes we actually read some of that literature, so it's become more incorporated into the curriculum. I would say curriculum is still an issue. We've never satisfactorily I think brought sexual orientation and gender identity into our curriculum to the point where kids regularly see themselves. Which is what I think is critical. But they do see it in the literature.

Q: Do you think that that's--has there been any pushback on that, or is it just that we feel that we have to cover so much, that this--we would take time away from A to talk about B?

A: That's a good question. I think it's both. I mean, there is resistance on the part of folks who are trained in these set novels, you know the classics of literature, which again tend to be written by white men, coincidence? So there is some pushback from those folks who say these are the classics, this is the canon, we're not going to--

Q: And you need to know the canon.

A: You need to know this, yeah. We're not going to expand it because we just don't have room. But I do think there's also some folks who are uncomfortable with having that subject matter being talked about, even though they talk about these issues--about heterosexuals' behavior--in the novels all the time, but I think they're just worried about the questions or the issues that might come up. There's always been pushback. Even at the state level we had this Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth back in the early '90s, set up by Governor Weld, who was very supportive. And they issued recommendations, including that Gay Straight Alliances should be set up in schools, that there should be training for faculty on violence prevention and suicide prevention. A number of different recommendations, all of which were adopted by the Board of Ed, except for the curriculum one.

Q: That's interesting.

A: And they said we should have a curriculum that's more diverse, including LGBT people. And the Board of Ed refused to support it, and even to this day hasn't fully embraced the recommendation. So there are--they have put together some units that the Commission on LGBT Youth--which is still around--they've created some units, but they haven't officially been approved yet by the Department of Ed in 2019. So it literally has been almost 30 years we've been working on this. And if the material is not there people aren't going to teach it.

Q: Yeah. Do you think that part of that may be if they come at it, as we were saying previously, from the civil rights aspect that you--you know, we can teach about Japanese internment camps now and we--Toni Morrison is part of the canon, so it's okay to--Audre Lorde can maybe sneak in there, and--

A: We can maybe talk about the fact that she's a lesbian.

Q: Maybe. And Mary Oliver, and as a poet--you know, there are these people who have attained status, and their sexual orientation is certainly a part of who they are--Lorraine Hansberry comes to mind when you're teaching *A Raisin in the Sun*, you know which is part of the canon. You can talk about how did a black woman who was married to a white man turn out this play, and how does she look at society, and how do her characters look at society, and what's the message that she wanted to put out, as well as the message that everybody knows when they read the play, which is integration of a formerly white neighborhood. And she took the phrase "a raisin in the sun" of course from James Baldwin, her friend. "What happens to a dream deferred..." And I think that--

A: Or was that Langston Hughes?

Q: Was it Langston Hughes? Maybe it was.

A: I think it was Langston Hughes

Q: "...or it dries up like a raisin in the sun." Can that be that it sort of sneaks in the back door that way maybe for curriculum's sake?

A: I'm hoping we can begin to think of all these issues as intersectional, and I think that's a new trend, certainly in looking at literature and looking at even people's lives in general--of focusing on how these aren't separate issues of gender, of race, of sexuality, these are intersectional. They really do--a person isn't just one of those identities, the one that's the most oppressed, which is kind of how we've always treated those things. So I'm hoping that we can--

Q: Or the most obvious maybe.

A: Yeah, or the most obvious, exactly, like their race, or their gender. But I'm hoping we can more and more talk about all of how these things interact to make a person whole, and that they all have something that impacts how they experience the world.

Q: I was just in Key West for the first time about a month ago, and the differences between the lines outside the Hemingway house and the lines outside the Tennessee Williams estate-- who goes to see them...there's no right answer, but they're both obviously titans of literature. And Tennessee Williams lived in Key West a lot longer than Ernest Hemingway did, and the idea that those men brought so much into their writing that isn't about being a white guy, which they both were.

A: Yeah. That's so true.

Q: There's a huge impact on their way to communicate.

A: But doesn't everyone go to the Hemingway house to see the six-toed cats?

Q: Apparently that's a big draw. I myself, yes. And there's a Truman White House, which no one goes to either, which I find interesting. I wonder if the trend now, as you've been teaching for such a long time and the idea of the change to...that students can walk from an English class to a history class to social science, and carry the same person with them, the same--see them in those three different facets, do you think we're getting closer to that ideal?

A: I hope so. I certainly see, for example in science classes--science used to be purely about numbers and chemicals and experiments, and nowadays it's much more humane. Students learn about the people who had all these breakthroughs, they learn to think about science not just from this kind of more non-human focus but rather from multiple perspectives. Even the mathematicians they learn about in math. We have Pi Day, it's huge in the school, and it isn't just about the numbers. So I'm hoping students are seeing that all these different fields, different subjects they study have connections, and the people who have made advances in those fields are connected.

Q: I think it's interesting that yesterday was the first picture of a black hole, and the woman--there was a woman who spearheaded that idea at MIT, and her picture was everywhere. And it was sort of "Yes, there's this huge scientific breakthrough and here's the woman who thought that we could do it." So even now I think outside the high school, the world at large is thinking that these things are connected and need to be...How can we get people interested in these things through the human angle of how people can look forward to seeing themselves--themselves.

A: Exactly. And basically it would open up for everyone just the chance to be who they are, so the girls don't feel like, "Oh, math and science is not a field I can go into." They can see people achieving at a high level, like, "I can be that."

Q: That's right. There's been this huge push toward STEM technology, especially in our part of the world here in Boston, that science and technology is open to everyone, and you don't have to be able to add up numbers from an abacus to excel at whatever you used to be able to excel at. It's now open for everyone.

A: Our vice president today performed in our--we have a student talent show called the Tertulia--and our vice president of the GSA performed doing hula hooping and reciting the numbers of pi. And she has memorized them to 800--the 800th number--isn't that incredible? And someone was in the audience checking that she was accurate, and she was. It was amazing.

Q: So there's a hierarchy in that there's a president and a vice president?

A: Yeah, although actually our officers of the group change depending on who wants what position.

Q: I see.

A: So sometimes we've had chairpeople, sometimes we've had managers, sometimes we have treasurers. We basically offer whatever people want to do, so if anyone wants a position, we're glad to give everyone a title if they want one.

Q: Very sweet. I was thinking...the idea of Newton South...how many clubs could you say..?

A: There are over 100.

Q. 100?

A: Yeah. It's just an amazing place to be if you want to start your own club. Every year we have about five or six that start. It's an incredible opportunity for kids to do whatever they want. But it is frustrating for the faculty because they need faculty advisors, so many of us advise two or three clubs.

Q: And I was thinking that--a student could be interested in robotics, and GSA, and the football team, and that puts a lot of pressure on them to--the basketball team, what's better for me, how do I spend my time? And as you say, Newton South is very academically oriented, so the amount of work that they're doing on the outside is also a difficult--

A: They're so overbooked, yeah.

Q: Yeah. So I just wanted to end on the--is there anything--on a note of, is there anything you want people to know about this, anything I haven't asked you that you want to talk a little bit about?

A: Well, I hope that people think about--since this is a Newton project--I hope people think about the fact that it was--it could have been any other--many liberal suburbs where progress could be made, but really Newton has taken a leadership role in a number of issues in the LGBT rights movement. And I think when the history is written of the LGBT, particularly youth rights movement, but also even same sex marriage, the mayor opened up city hall for--

Q: The first day, right?

A: Yeah, the very first day. I live in Cambridge, and we opened up the city hall at midnight, and I was couple 111. My husband and I were couple 111. But this part of the country is known for

being liberal, but I would say most of the schools where I went and did training in the '90s and the first decade of the 21st century, everyone said they were very conservative, that there wasn't going to be much progress there. So I think we need to acknowledge that Newton has been very supportive and we've had a few folks in the community who have been the staunch opposition, and they've been very vocal, but they haven't shut down the work we've done at all. And really the people who have been most amazing in my eyes have been the young people. So it's been the students who have taken the ball and run with it. They're the ones who've gone to city hall to demand change--

Q: To the state house.

A: They've gone to the state house to lobby. They've marched in marches. We've been marching in the pride parade ever since the mid '90s, and they've been out there doing the work changing hearts and minds. So it's real exciting to watch that happen, to see it continue now, when we're talking about gender issues and romantic orientation and intersectionality. So I'm very optimistic about the future, because of the young people who are so passionate about these issues.

Q: And the fact that eighth graders are looking forward to joining it in 9th grade is a very--

A: Yeah, it's fantastic. You know, all of the middle schools now have Gay Straight Alliances.

Q: Oh I didn't realize that. Nice.

A: Yeah. So all four, it was about five years ago I think they--all four. So it has moved to the middle school level. A number of middle schools around the country now have groups. Sometimes they're called diversity clubs and sometimes they're called rainbow clubs, but they're basically places where students can talk about these issues in a safe place. And at the end of the day, I think that's what's most important, is that young people feel safe, welcome, and

included--that they don't feel like they're going to take their lives because there's no hope,./ and that they aren't guided by those fears. So if you think back to the beginning of this interview, I talked about all those fears that people in my community had for what would happen if we talked about this? But I found throughout all the work I've done over the past 30 years that if you're guided by your fears that leads to virtually no change--that we keep with the status quo, and usually the status quo means injustice and lack of safety. And so if you're guided by your hopes, I really do think that--as idealistic as that sounds--I really have found that you can create change and dramatic change. I think we've done that here in Massachusetts. We've done it here in Newton. We've done it at Newton South High School. And it's been really gratifying to be a part of that.

Q: That's great. Thank you very much for all your time and effort, I really appreciate it.

A: You're very welcome.

Q: Thanks.

A: Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW